

# DON'T THINK RIDE

*A short bike trip across America*

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Make it count.

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See [www.nathanmillward.com](http://www.nathanmillward.com) for more information on my travels

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## INTRODUCTION

America remains as one of the great places to ride a motorcycle. For some it might not be seen as particularly adventurous or far enough off the beaten track, but for those who want to enjoy their miles, see some incredible scenery and get lost on a relatively manageable adventure then it still has a lot to offer.

What appeals to me is the scale of the country, and that within that vast area of land there is so much difference and contrast. The scenery changes from state to state and even from valley to valley. So do the people, their culture and their food. It might be one large nation but it feels much like lots of different countries, all interlocking and without borders, meaning you can ride as far and as wide as you like.

This wouldn't be my first time across the country on two wheels. Back in 2012 I had ridden a 105cc Australian Post bike (a

Honda CT110) from New York to San Francisco, then up through Canada to Alaska. It was a trip that followed on from my original adventure on that bike from Sydney to London.

In total I rode for over 35,000 miles, and whilst a cruising speed of 40mph wasn't always ideal, it did allow me to see the world and get a taste for a life of two wheeled adventure. Above all else, it showed me that it doesn't matter what bike you ride, what kit you ride in, or even where you ride, just that you get out there and ride.

Time moves on though, and the appeal of the big solo adventure just wasn't there anymore. Certainly, there are many enjoyable miles, but there are also very many miserable and lonely ones as well. And being on the road for months or years on end can take their toll. It isn't sustainable; you can't live a life like that forever. And so for me it was a case of finding a new way to travel that was more manageable, but also no less rewarding.

This is how I came to be planning another trip across America, this time on a slightly bigger bike and this time with someone on the back. I'd never done a two-up trip before, and my pillion had never been on a bike until we met 9 months ago on *Plenty of Fish*.

Our plan was to fly the bike into Las Vegas, travel around for just over a month, before finally returning the bike to England via a boat out of New York. For us it was a manageable length of time, and both of us were very much looking forward to it.

The bike we would be riding is a 2014 BMW R1200 GS. It stands as the polar opposite of the postie bike I rode across the world, but for me it was a bike I always enjoyed riding. After my big trip I got involved with the motorcycle magazine industry, and through that got to ride pretty much all of the big ‘adventure’ bikes. The GS was always my favourite, and despite it having a bit of a pipe and slippers image - and it being bashed by some for being too big, heavy and complicated for ‘proper’ adventures - as a bike for a trip like America it was ideal.

The bike I bought was an ex training school bike from the official off-road training school over in Wales. It was one year old, had done 3,500 miles but obviously had had a hard life, being used and abused by every novice rider learning to ride off-road on the two day skills course. They seem to take the abuse pretty well though, and you still get a manufacturer’s warranty with them.

When the bike came up for sale I couldn’t afford it outright and never for a minute thought I’d get finance on it. It was up for sale at Bahnstormers BMW in Maidenhead for £8500, so a good few thousand pounds less than a bike that hadn’t been used as an off road schools bike. When Steph, my friend who worked at the dealer, rang and said I’d been approved for finance I didn’t have the resolve or will power to say actually I’d better not. Instead I just had to figure out how I was going to afford the £247 a month the repayments were going to cost me. I was excited though. I had

a new bike. And I think regardless of which brand or model you go for, you should just buy the one that excites you the most.

Admittedly, I crashed the GS off-road a few times and wept at the extra damage I put on it, not to mention the cost of broken parts I had to replace. I quickly discovered that riding a big expensive bike off-road can be a big expensive hobby, but it was nice to know that I had the bike sat in the garage.

After six months however I started to question the amount I was paying on it and the use I was getting out of it. It was a lot of money to be paying every month for what you might call a luxury item. I began to struggle to justify it.

It came down to a decision to either sell it or do something with it; by do something with it I meant, take it on an adventure.

With rent to pay, a partner to be there for and a desire for adventure but no thirst for one as long as the last, I came around to thinking about America, and how it would be the perfect bike for exploring the country on. When I mentioned this to my potential pillion passenger it was met with interest and excitement.

Both of us have jobs that allow us plenty of time off, at the expense of earning any money during that time off, meaning time wouldn’t be a problem, and the money we could just about scrape together. The biggest hurdle with ideas such as these is taking the idea and making it actually happen. Good intentions can soon get swept away by the wave of doubt that always comes sweeping

along after the making of any great plan.

As a result, it took at least a few weeks of umming and aching before we sat down and booked some flights. For me that’s always the best place to start; book something in, whether it’s flights or accommodation... just something. By doing this you are committing to it, and I find that once you’ve got something booked in then all those decisions you’ve been agonising over involving the trip suddenly seem so simple, and you spring into action, and things get done and no matter how much time you have you always seem to have enough time, just because you need to make it happen.

It was a no brainer in taking my own bike for the nigh on five week trip. By taking your own bike you’re committing to the adventure and taking something of a risk, especially with a bike that was still being paid off on finance for the next few years. The fear is of damaging it, having it stolen or devaluing it significantly. On the other hand, it’s good because you know the bike; you know its history and how it rides. You can pack and prepare it how you like and it adds to the sense of excitement, being on a foreign plated bike in a land so far from home.

Despite my previous travels I was nervous and a bit scared. The fear was of being responsible for a pillion passenger, as when you’re on your own it’s just you you have to look out for. Now I would have someone who meant a lot to me on the back, and so I

had to ensure their safety, and enjoyment, as well.

To get the bike ready I’d already fitted a full set of AltRider crash bars that had previously saved the bike from damage on numerous occasions. Also some Metal Mule panniers and back rack, an Oxford tank bag and a new set of Continental TKC70 tyres, which I hoped would last the length of the trip.

The plan was to fly into Las Vegas, along with the bike, with the return flight booked out of New York nearly five weeks later. This would give the trip a start and an end point. What would happen between these two points, at this stage we had no idea. We were just going to get on the plane and go.







#### SHIPPING A BIKE TO AMERICA

Sending your own bike to the States isn't as difficult as you might think, and for anything over three weeks it can actually work out cheaper than renting. We used a shipping agency by the name of James Cargo, who I'd used before on the postie bike trip.

The process is relatively straight forward, dropping off your loaded bike - ideally with less than a quarter-tank of fuel - at the company's depot near Heathrow. They then strap it to a pallet, build a wooden frame around it and the next time you see it is at the airport in America. They generally need the bike a week before you intend to fly, with you even able to

travel on the same plane if you like.

In terms of costs, for my bike it would be £1125 to fly it into Las Vegas and £795 to bring it back out of New York by boat. On top of that, you need to insure the bike against third party liability (it also covers theft and damage). For this we used Motorcycle Express, who provide a policy and breakdown cover for just under £400 for two months. The only other fee is a \$50 payment at the cargo depot. The only paperwork you need is a free letter of exemption from the Environmental Protection Agency.

By comparison, to rent a 1200 GS in America for the same amount of time would have cost around £4500.



## AT THE AIRPORT

Probably the hardest task of taking a bike overseas is the bureaucracy that meets you at the other end. Compared to places like East Timor or Nepal, collecting a bike out of American customs is fairly easy and obviously helped by having a shared language.

The main thing to remember is just to be patient, get there early, expect it to take a couple of hours and under no circumstances loose your temper as this will only make things worse.

In the case of collecting the bike at the airport in Las Vegas, the process is to start by finding the cargo depot, then locating

the airline the bike was sent through (in this case Virgin Atlantic). Once located, you hand them your paperwork. They'll give you more paperwork to take to customs, which in Las Vegas was back in the main terminal building. Sometimes you might have to explain what you're trying to do - temporarily import your bike - which is allowed for up to a year. Customs will then stamp your form, you take that back to the cargo terminal who not long after wheel out the crate with your bike in it.

Crack open the box, dispose of the wood (in this case the staff were a great help), and with fuel in the tank you just fire up the bike and ride away. Simple as that.





#### MAKING A PLAN

Riding from the airport in a foreign land on a bike that you brought from home is a very surreal experience. You feel exposed, vulnerable and conspicuous. But once the nerves settle it's just a case of making a plan and getting on with it. We flew into Vegas rather than anywhere else because I knew that from the airport a few miles of riding and you'd be out in the desert. It's an easy place to start from, especially carrying a first time pillion.

Making a plan is crucial, no matter how loose it is. Some people like to know exactly where they're going and where they're going to stay, others are happy to wing it and make



it up as they go along. Never fight what feels right. If you want book something then do it. If you want to hang loose and see where the road takes you, then do that as well. There is never one best way on an adventure.

For this trip we had no plan other than that during the course of it we would need to ride from Las Vegas to New York, a distance if you rode directly there of 2500 miles. We had an idea of some of the places we wanted to see along the way, and for us, most of those places were around Utah and Nevada, where there is so much to see in such a relatively small area.

The first decision we made was to briefly venture west, back towards Death Valley.



## DEATH VALLEY

Death Valley is a National Park some two hours drive west from Las Vegas and is officially the hottest place on earth, reaching a record 134 °F (56.7 °C) on July 10, 1913. I'd passed through it on the postie bike trip and had been amazed by the serenity of it, not to mention the heat, which is so dry and arid.

This being September we'd hoped for cooler temperatures, instead being met by an unusually hot day for this time of year, peaking at a high of 121 °F (49.4 °C). As a baptism of fire for my pillion passenger it was certainly as hot as it was going to get, with riding in this heat uncomfortable due to the lack of air flow.

The scenery goes some way to making up for it, with the road from the village of Shoshone first taking a long descent down into Death Valley, then turning to run right along the crease of where the walls of the valley meet the floor. The floor of the canyon is in large part salt flats, so to the eye looks flat and white, whilst the rock faces rising up from it on either side are a multitude of colours, often fierce reds and charcoal greys. It resembles the embers of a fire when you take them from the hearth.

We camped that night on a free campsite looking back down into the valley. It was just as hot at night as it was in the day. There was sufferance in this, but also great beauty.









